The Impact of the New Testament on the Roman Institution of Slavery

Research Thesis

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Slavery was widespread in ancient Greco-Roman culture. Theologians often try to view Christianity as a new set of ideals, separate from those of contemporary Greco-Roman society. In actuality, early Christian literature, when viewed in the context of contemporary Greco-Roman literature, shows a continuation and even perhaps a reinforcement of the institution of slavery. My research focuses on references to slavery in early Christian literature, namely in the Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Luke, both Deutero- and Historical-Pauline Epistles, and Patristic literature. Some of these references have been used to argue that early Christianity attempted to blur or abolish the slave-free distinction. My thesis is that these references are consistent with Greco-Roman literature on slavery and reinforce the Greco-Roman institution of slavery. In light of contemporary literature, early Christian authors show consistency and continuation of Greco-Roman ideals and family values. This continuation casts doubt on Whig history, the study of history as a continual march of progress towards freedom. The consistency of the early Christian literature with contemporary non-Christian literature casts doubt on Christianity as an "overthrow" of values and ethics as argued by John Dominic Crossan. Early Christian family values were implicated in ancient Greco-Roman family values. Finally, this research shows the importance of interpreting early Christian literature in light of other contemporary Greco-Roman literature rather than separate the two as is often done.

In *Politics*, Aristotle states that "ruling and being ruled are not only among the things that are inevitable, but also among things that are beneficial, and some creatures are marked out to rule or to be ruled right from the moment they come

into existence."[1] Here Aristotle provided his answer to the debate over whether slavery is natural or goes against nature. Aristotle believed slaves were sub-human creatures, born to be subordinate to other superior human beings. In Aristotle's beliefs, slavery was not only natural, but it was actually "beneficial" just as it was "for the body to be ruled by the soul."[1]

Stoic philosophy regarding slavery centers on the idea that the goddess Fortuna, or Chance, is omnipotent and may drastically alter a man's status in this life at any moment. Fortuna may decide to make a free man into a donkey if she so wishes, as seen in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Unlike Aristotle, the Stoics did not believe slaves were sub-human but that they essentially had bad luck and that bad luck may happen to anyone, no matter who he is. In *Letters* 47, Seneca replies to a master denouncing his slaves, "when you consider how much Chance can exert over you both, they are fellow slaves."[2] In this way, the Stoics give more humanity to slaves than Aristotle, but in no way attempted to suggest abolition. The Stoics believed in metaphorical slavery and argued that even free men are not free; that is to say they are slaves to materialistic or worldly things such as sex or wealth. In *Satires*, 2, 7.75-94, Horace asks, "Are you my owner—you, who submit to orders from so many powerful forces and persons?"[3] Such Stoic ideas pervade the New Testament and early Christian literature. Stoicism is the most relevant philosophy when it comes to the literature on slavery in early Christianity.

[1] Aristotle. *Politics* 1, 2. trans. Wiedemann 1981: 15-21.
[2] Seneca. *Letters* 47. trans. Wiedemann 1981: 233-36
[3] Horace. *Satires* 2. trans. Wiedemann 1981: 231-32.

According to the Stoic view, no matter what one may be subjected to in this world, everyone is subject to Fortune, so the social status of a person at a given time is irrelevant.[4] Seneca in his *Dialogue* 9[5] states, "We are all fettered to Fortune," and, "all life is slavery." This idea is comparable to that which is implied by Jesus in the canonical gospels, that everyone is a slave to God. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew contain several references to slaves, mostly in the parables of Jesus. In his teaching about wealth, Jesus states, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). God and wealth are masters and all people are the slaves who cannot serve both. In addition, in parables such as that of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-35), the master serves as a metaphor for God, and his slaves are all of us as slaves of God.[6] This idea is parallel to Stoic philosophy, where God replaces Fortune as master of all. In addition to this, within the Gospels Jesus states that, "Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-28). Similar statements are made by Jesus in Luke 9:46-50, 14:11, 18:14, and 22:26-27. This statement implies an eschatological reversal: eventually God will decide the fate of an individual come Judgement Day, and even though one is a master and superior in this life, God has the power to bring that man to the status of a slave. Again, God appears to be replacing Fortune in Stoic thought. "We are all fettered to Fortune" becomes "We are all fettered to God." Stoicism argues that we

[4] Wiedemann (1981): 224
[5] Seneca. *Dialogue* 9: *The Tranquility of the Mind*. Trans. Wiedemann 1981: 237.
[6] Glancy (2011): 458.

are all equally human, but since we are all subject to Fortune, it does not matter what one's social status is because Fortune has the ability to swiftly take this away at any moment.[7] One may only control whether or not his soul is enslaved by choosing to be wise and of good moral character.[8] The aforementioned passages in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew differ from this philosophy in that being subservient to fellow man is what is morally superior and that if one acts accordingly he will be great when it comes time for God's judgment. In the same way that Stoicism suggests an acceptance of the institution of slavery, so does the teaching of the Matthean Jesus in that a man's status, as opposed to moral character in accordance with God's wishes, is irrelevant to judgment in God's eyes.

Along with Stoic parallels in Jesus's teachings, slaves' involvement in the Gospels provides a multitude of evidence supporting the acceptance of the contemporary Roman attitude on slavery. In one parable of Matthew's Gospel, that of the unmerciful slave (Matt. 18:23-35), Jesus gives the “members of the church” a lesson on how they should forgive. The parable is based upon a king whose servant owes him a debt. The king forgives his servant, who then goes to his own servant who owes him a debt. The king's servant chooses to be unforgiving towards his own servant and punishes him. Once the king finds this out he is furious that he himself was forgiving and his own servant was not, and he hands his servant over to the domestic torturers until he pays off the debt. Jesus then proclaims, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35). It was common in the Roman world that a master would

[7] Wiedemann (1981): 232.
[8] Garnsey (1996): 133

use torturers (*mancipes*[9] or *lorarii*[10]) in order to punish slaves. By using a reference like this, the Matthean Jesus must assume that this is an ordinary practice so that his audience would have been able to relate to this idea.[11] J. A. Harrill argues correctly that no real psychology is able to be derived from slaves within this metaphor since the parable represents the slaveowner's viewpoint.[12] To take this a step further using the master-slave metaphor in the parable, a slave would have been incredibly hardpressed to relate to this parable. If God serves as the king in the metaphor, then the unforgiving servant would logically have to be a king or master. Although within the parable one may interpret the king, or God, as being kindly towards the lower servant, one must first realize that the purpose of the parable is to serve as a lesson on how and why one should forgive before making that assumption. This parable has little to no lesson or moral answer to how and why a real-life (non-metaphorical) slave should forgive.[13] When Jesus's reputed teachings and parables in the Gospels are analyzed along side the definition of a slave as proposed by Orlando Patterson, it can be further inferred that they had no intention of changing the status quo of slavery. According to Patterson, the slave is socially dead; that is he is subject to corporeal violence, natally alienated, and fundamentally dishonored.[14] Corporeal violence is seen throughout the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as described above. Fundamental dishonor is implied in the fact that not one parable addresses moral questions that a slave might have, whereas it is relatable only to a

[9] Glancy (2002): 102.
[10] Harrill (2011): 69.
[11] Glancy (2002): 102
[12] Harrill (2011): 73.
[13] Glancy (2002): 115.
[14] Patterson (1982): 17-34.

master class audience. Natal alienation is apparent in the fact that not a single slave is given a name in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, nor a single mention of their place of birth. If Patterson's definition of slavery holds, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke show no sign of deviation from the norm of slavery. As in other Greco-Roman literature, Jesus's parable of the unforgiving servant is fundamentally dishonoring slaves at the bottom of the social ladder by means of the neglect to provide slaves with any sort of valuable moral lesson, other than that their masters should forgive them when they are indebted.

The parable of the overseer (Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46) contrasts two distinct types of slave manager, one good and one bad. The good is assigned more responsibility (Matt. 24:47; Luke 12:44) and the bad is cut into pieces and thrown into a place with fellow bad servants (Matt. 24:51; Luke 12:46). Unlike in Matthew's, in Luke's version we are provided with a further lesson, "That servant who knew his master's will but didn't prepare for it or act on it will be beaten severely. The one who didn't know the master's will but who did things deserving punishment will be beaten only a little" (Luke 12:47-48). This passage brings to light Roman *auctoritas* and therefore displays the author of Luke's Roman ideology. As defined by J. Albert Harrill, *auctoritas* "denoted the quality of actual power in the individual person (the *auctor*) granted by the willing compliance of subordinates and the esteem of one's colleagues, in contrast to the transactional power from governmental magistracies, social status, or family name."[15] As indicated by Harrill, Luke does not give a thought to a situation in which a slave is not beaten by his master. The reward that the "good

[15] Harrill (2006): 2.

slaves" receive is more responsibility over their master's estate.[16] Another parable involving a similar reward is the parable of the talents (Luke 19:12-27; Matt. 25:14-30), in which a king entrusts his servants with his money. Although the story lines of the two different versions of the parable differ, the basic idea remains; there are three servants involved, two who make a profit from the money entrusted them and one who, out of fear of losing the harsh king's money, does nothing with it. The two who make a profit are rewarded with more responsibility and the one who did nothing with the money is punished and cast away. The rewards of the good servants in both the parable of the overseer and of the talents are solely in the interest of the masters, and provide no true benefit to the servants themselves.[17] Although, unlike in the parable of the unforgiving slave, slaves might have been able to draw a conclusion to a moral question from these two parables, any interest in morality of slaves within the parable is entirely neglected.

Jennifer Glancy points out the consistent use of corporeal punishment inflicted on slaves by masters in the Matthean Jesus's parables. As previously mentioned, since master is meant to be a metaphor for God, these punishments are meant to serve as a warning of what he may do to the members of the Matthean church if they act in ways similar to the slaves. Glancy puts special emphasis on the Gospel of Matthew, since it is more consistent with its use of corporeal abuse. In the parables of the unforgiving servant, the wicked tenants, the wedding party, the overseer, and the talents slaves are tortured (Matt. 18:34), beaten and killed (Matt. 21:35; Matt. 22:6), cut into pieces (Matt. 24:51), and cast to a place where "there will

[16] Harrill (2011): 68.
[17] Glancy (2002): 115.

be weeping and grinding" of teeth (Matt. 24:51; Matt. 25:30). These punishments are consistent with the harsh reality of how slaves were treated by Roman masters according to other literature of the era.[18]

The parables of the overseer (Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46), the unforgiving slave (Matt. 18:23-28), and the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-8) all also have been successfully compared to stock themes of Plautine Roman comedy by Harrill.[19] Just as Kathleen McCarthy argues that Plautine comedies should not be used in order to interpret the viewpoint of slaves since they merely express the viewpoint of the master class,[20] so too should the parables not be. The parables of the overseer and of the unforgiving slave both use the stock theme of *absente ero* or "when the master is absent." What this theme implies is that the only concerns of the slaves when the masters leave are either of how to please the master while he is away so as to avoid punishment (*servus bonus* or the "good slave") or how to best rebel in a playful manner so as to trick the master (the "bad slave"). In the parable of the overseer, the faithful servant placed in charge fulfills his responsibilities given him by the master while the "bad slave" rebels by beating fellow slaves, eating, and getting drunk. Although the evil slave does not necessarily act in a playful manner, instead of trying to escape and gain freedom he acts like an adolescent and rebels by essentially partying. Also, by beating his slaves he is in essence playing the role of master, a theme seen in Plautine comedy, namely in *Persa* in which the slave Toxilus plays the master role. In the parable of the unforgiving slave, the slave begs his

[18] Glancy (2002): 112-129.
[19] Harrill (2011): 71-74.
[20] McCarthy (2000): 211-213.

master for forgiveness in a long emotional monologue. Again *absente ero*, the slave reveals his true nature and beats his own slave, playing master while his own is away.[21]

The parable that is most comparable to farce of Plautine comedy is that of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-8). In this parable, a master finds out that his manager has been abusing his estate. The manager then goes into a panic and insists, "I'm not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg" (Luke 16:3). He goes on to devise and carry out a trick upon his master in order to ensure his next management position. The manager fulfills the role of two types of stock characters in Plautine comedy, that of the parasite, who then acts as the *servus callidus* (the "clever slave"). The characteristics that defined the parasite in Plautine comedy according to Harrill are that "he cannot exist without a host, transacts business as a cheap hireling/agent, sees parasitism as a career, takes after the slave on the level of comic convention, has a penchant for absolutes and extremes, and relocates to new hosts when resources from the current one are gone." The dishonest manager makes it clear that he cannot exist without a host. "What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager?" (Luke 16:3). In addition, he wastes his master's estate ("a cheap hireling/agent") and immediately devises a trick that will land him his next managerial position ("sees parasitism as a career" and "relocates to new hosts when resources from the current one are gone"). The dishonest manager declares, "I'm not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg" (Luke 16:3). This statement falls under the characteristic of having a "penchant for absolutes and

[21] Harrill (2011): 71-74.

extremes" in that even women and children are strong enough to dig and did in fact in antiquity. The characteristic that the parasite "takes after the slave on the level of comic convention" becomes apparent when the dishonest manager devises his clever plan to find a new host by pretending to still be the master's agent and reducing the debts of those who owe the master. The master finds out about his deceit and commends it. By doing this, the parasite then plays the role of the *servus callidus*, or the clever slave, another stock character in Plautine comedy. The *servus callidus* in Plautine comedy is a slave in some sort of managerial position who brought upon himself a crisis which he resolved by carrying out a ruse on a master, and is ultimately pardoned or goes unpunished for his misdeeds.[22] One example of a Plautine play that utilizes these themes is the play *Persa* in which the character Toxilus plays the *servus callidus*. Toxilus's master is away (*absente ero*) and he is determined to buy a courtesan that he loves named Lemneselene who is owned by a pimp named Dordalus. Toxilus, moneyless, devises a scheme in which he uses the classic parasite named Saturio, Saturio's daughter, and a fellow slave named Sagaristio in order to trick Dordalus (*servus callidus*) into selling Lemneselene to Toxilus. The trick works, Dordalus is humiliated, and Toxilus goes unpunished.[23] Kathleen McCarthy argues that Plautine Roman comedy and its stock slave characters were tools that Plautus purposefully employed in order to play on the master class's constant anxiety about *auctoritas* and of true rebellion by slaves.[24] Although the *servus callidus* rebels, he always ends as being childish, playful, and

[22] Harrill (2006): 66-83.
[23] Plautus. *Persa*. Loeb Classical Library.
[24] McCarthy (2000): 212.

without any serious threat to the institution of slavery. In a similar way, the parables of the overseer, the unforgiving slave, and the dishonest manager utilized the stock characters from Plautine Roman comedy (the *servus bonus*, the *servus callidus*, and the parasite) and theme *absente ero* in order to relate to a master class Roman comedy audience and therefore there is nothing morally meaningful that can be derived from them regarding slaves or the institution of slavery.[25] Again, it is the neglect of any consideration for the moral questions of slaves that makes a statement about the attitude within the parables towards slavery.

References to slavery in the Pauline epistles include the "household codes" in the Deutero-Pauline epistles as well as Galatians 3:28. The "household codes" are blatantly Greco-Roman and promote the hierarchy of dominance within the household; that is to say, masters dominate slaves, husbands dominate wives, and fathers dominate children. The "household codes" in Colossians 3:18-4:1 devote the longest section to slaves being obedient to their masters:

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

This excerpt is an example of the use of God as a reason that slaves should not shirk their duties. Another example of this is in the Ephesian "household codes," which state that slaves should obey their masters "with fear and trembling…as you obey Christ." By being humble and obedient, slaves are "doing the will of God from the heart." Colossians and Ephesians state that masters should treat slaves "justly and fairly" and "stop threatening them," respectively. Glancy points out that "justly and

[25] Harrill (2011): 71-74.

fairly" likely had a different connotation in the first century. While beating and subordinating enslaved and dehumanized people would not fall under the category of "just and fair" in the modern age, it probably did for first century Roman authors when considering other contemporary literature.[26]

Galatians 3:28 states, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Without context, this line seemingly denounces the institution of slavery by severing the slave-free boundary. The context of this excerpt is that Paul is talking about baptism. Even without considering that this line was a baptismal formula, Paul directly contradicts any possible abolitionist connotation in Galatians 3:28 in Galatians 4.[27] In Galatians 4, Paul uses a double metaphor. Unbaptized Christians are like sons who have not yet been adopted as an heir by his father. Before he is adopted, the son is like a slave in that slaves run his life. Once the son becomes an heir, he is no longer slavish. By his employment of this metaphor, Paul highlights the slave-free distinction and therefore implies an accepting of slavery. This directly contradicts the argument that Galatians 3:28 was meant to physically erase the slave-free distinction.

The Church Fathers were eminent Christian theologians in the centuries after the birth and death of Jesus who often consisted of influential teachers and bishops.[28] Among them is Tertullian, Lactantius, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa. Tertullian was a North African Christian writer and apologist. The times of

[26] Glancy (2006): 140-145.
[27] Glancy (2006): 34-38.
[28] Ferguson (1997): 424-25.

his birth and death are unknown, but some of his writings are dated to 196/7 AD and 212 AD.[29] Lactantius was also a Christian apologist from North Africa and lived ca. 250 AD-ca. 325 AD. His works include *The Divine Institutes* written around 305-310 AD.[30] Ambrose was the bishop of Milan from 374-397 AD. His ideas on slavery are very Stoic and Roman.[31] Gregory of Nyssa lived in the 4th century AD and was bishop of Nyssa. Gregory's *Homily IV on Ecclesiastes* is likely the most prominently cited Christian attack on slavery for those who believe that early Christians sought change in the institution.[32] Finally, Augustine was bishop of Hippo in North Africa and lived from 354-430 AD. He was perhaps the most influential Patristic Father, having been the originator of the theory of original sin.[33]

In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries the typical Roman attitude towards slavery persisted in the Christian literature and no movement towards anything close to an abolition of slavery became apparent. In *De Cultu Feminarum* 2.10.5-6, Tertullian asks, "Do not wise heads of families purposely offer and permit some things to their servants in order to try whether and how they will use the things thus permitted; whether (they will do so) with honesty, or with moderation?" This is just one example of a Church Father with a Roman view on slaves. Here Tertullian is treating slaves as a whole as children, who may be "good" or "bad" when put in such a position, as in the stock themes in Plautine comedy. Tertullian's employment of a test to see whether or not slaves with "honesty" or "moderation" is brings to light

[29] Ferguson (1997): 1107-9.
[30] Ferguson (1997): 660-61.
[31] Ferguson (1997): 41-44.
[32] Ferguson (1997): 495-99.
[33] Ferguson (1997): 148-154.

the Roman agricultural writers who often tested different methods in order to solve the problem of slave *inertia*, or lack of efficiency. For instance, Roman agricultural author Columella advocated free management of estates by slaves, specialization of slave jobs, and gang labor as incentives for slaves to increase the efficiency of their work.[34] Harrill points out Tertullian's portrayal of slaves as the "domestic enemy."[35] In *Apology* 7.3, Tertullian states, "even among the very slaves of our own household because of their corrupt nature."

There is the example of the apologist Lactantius, who wrote at the turn of the fourth century that "it was perfectly appropriate that the bad slave be punished physically" and "the master was best advised to behave magnanimously, giving him words of praise and increasing his responsibilities as a reward for his loyal service," as summarized by Bradley. To Lactantius, punishment for "reprobate behavior" was an opportunity for "moral improvement" of the slave and was in fact a responsibility of the slaveholder. These opinions show no deviation from the punishments and rewards that Roman slaveholders gave centuries earlier.[36] In fact, in the Gospel parables slaves were rewarded with more responsibility as noted above in the parable of the overseer (Matt. 24:47; Luke 12:44), so Lactantius's ideas seemingly mirror the aforementioned "good slave" versus "bad slave" parable themes. This perhaps implies that if Lactantius was at all influenced by the gospel parables of Matthew and Luke, it was in the opposite direction of ameliorating the institution of slavery, although this is difficult to support from the evidence in Lactantius himself.

[34] Bradley (1994): 74.
[35] Harrill (2003): 385-390.
[36] Bradley (1994): 148.

Glancy also points out that Lactantius discouraged male slaveholders from sexually abusing female slaves. Although this may seem noble at face value, Glancy goes on to show that Lactantius was not concerned with the female slaves but rather, as was typical of Roman authors, with the slaveholders and what effect the sexual abuse had on them. Not only that, but in *Institutiones Divinae* 6.23.23-30, Lactantius is concerned that sexual abuse of female slaves might make them think that adultery is acceptable, as if slaves were mere children.[37]

Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, brings us back to the Stoicism-Christianity relationship. In his writing, he makes Stoicism work for the Christian cause but never makes the connection between his use of the Stoic doctrine to justify physical enslavement and Christianity, according to Garnsey. Ambrose states, "It is not the status that a man happens to have that a man happens to have that makes him a slave, but rather shameful folly." Ambrose, like Lactantius, spoke out against the sexual exploitation of female slaves by slaveholders. Also like Lactantius, indicative in *De Joseph patriarcha* 5.22, Ambrose's concern is with the fact that female slaves may become insubordinate or arrogant as a result of the sexual abuse. He shows no concern for its damaging effects on the dignity of female slaves.[38]

Augustine, the fifth century bishop of Hippo, wrote in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 124:7[39] that "Christ does not want to make you proud," and "you were not made a Christian so that you might disdain to serve." In this passage, Augustine implies that slaves should be obedient to their master in order to serve Christ. He

[37] Glancy (2006): 58-59.
[38] Glancy (2006): 58-59.
[39] Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 124. trans. Garnsey 1996: 29.

also calls our attention to how ubiquitous slavery was in his time in this same passage. "The elemental, daily demonstration of the power of man over man is that of master over slaves. Almost every household has a display of power of this kind." Earlier in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 103:3, 9,[40] Augustine states, "We are, willy nilly, slaves." This refers back to the Stoic philosophy that we are all slaves to some earthly force, "fettered to fortune" and to the Gospel parables, which utilize the master-slave metaphor for God and the human race.

As Harrill pointed out with Tertullian, Bradley notices Augustine's view of slaves as the "domestic enemy" in *Confessions* 9.8. In *Confessions* 9.8, Augustine tells the story of a maidservant of his mother who insults her alcoholic tendencies. Augustine states, "Even as friends by their flattery pervert, so do enemies by their taunts often correct us," with the "enemy" being the maidservant. In addition, in *Confessions* 9.9, Augustine refers to slaves as "evil-disposed." Augustine also had a somewhat Aristotelian view on slaves in that slavery is "a condition of unimaginable ill." To Augustine, slavery was a punishment for Original Sin and slaves are inherently so.[41] Garnsey points out that this view is contradictory with the Stoic view on slavery that appears in Augustine literature.

John Chrysostom in the late fourth and early fifth century wrote that, "And just as we, when we buy slaves, first ask those who are being sold if they are willing to be our slaves, so also does Christ." He goes on to say that whereas "we" price slaves according to whether or not they are wicked, Christ "puts down a price for us

[40] Augustine. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 103. trans. Garnsey 1996: 206-7.
[41] Bradley (1994): 151.

all, and it is his precious blood."[42] In writing this, John Chrysostom has implied that his audience would have been familiar with buying and pricing slaves. He also uses the metaphor that we are all slaves to God, implied by Jesus in the gospels.

Gregory of Nyssa supposedly attacks the institution of slavery in his *Homily IV on Ecclesiastes* according to D. Bentley Hart. Bentley claims that Gregory's homily regards slavery as "intrinsically sinful, opposed to God's actions, salvation, and the church, and essentially incompatible with the Gospel."[43] This view is a very good example of a piece of Christian literature being wrongly interpreted without the context of contemporary Roman literature. This becomes especially apparent when one compares Gregory's *Homily IV* side-by-side with Seneca's *Letters* 47, which was written centuries before. Gregory's states:

> But has the scrap of paper, and the written contract, and the counting out of obols deceived you into thinking yourself the master of *the image of God*. What folly! If the contract were lost, if the writing were eaten away by worms, if a drop of water should somehow seep in and obliterate it, what guarantee have you of their slavery? What have you to sustain your title as owner? I see no superiority over the subordinate accruing to you from the title other than the mere title. What does this power contribute to you as a person? – not longevity, nor beauty, nor good health, nor superiority in virtue. Your origin is from the same ancestors, your life is of the same kind, sufferings of soul and body prevail alike over you who own him and over the one who is subject to your ownership – pains and pleasures, merriment and distress, sorrows and delights, rages and terrors, sickness and death. Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner? Do they not draw in the same air as they breathe? Do they not see the sun in the same way? Do they not alike sustain their being by consuming food? Is not the arrangement of their guts the same? Are not the two one dust after death? Is there not one judgment for them? – a common Kingdom, and a common Gehenna?

Without context, it is easy to see how one might interpret this excerpt of *Homily IV* as abolitionist. Essentially what Gregory is saying is that we are all human at our core and come Judgement Day, God is the master of all and whatever status an

[42] John Chrysostom. *Ad illuminandos catechesis* 12. trans. Garnsey 1996: A9.
[43] Hart (2001): 51-69.

individual may hold on Earth becomes meaningless. Looking at this excerpt in context, centuries earlier, Seneca wrote something strikingly similar:

> You must think carefully about the fact that the man whom you call your slave is born from the same seed, enjoys the same sky, breathes like you, dies like you! You are as able to recognize a free man in him as he to recognize a slave in you. After the destruction of Varus' army, Chance pulled down many men of respectable birth who were expecting to attain senatorial rank as the result of a military career; it made one of them a shepherd, another a door-keeper. Will you be contemptuous of a man whose status is one which you may yourself be reduced to—for all that you're contemptuous of it?[44]

In this context, it becomes apparent that Gregory of Nyssa was essentially reiterating Senecan philosophy on slavery. Gregory basically replaces Seneca's "Chance" with "God," and the destruction of Varus' army with Judgement Day. Both Chance and God have the power to bring a king down to the status of slave and through the destruction of Varus' and Judgment Day, respectively, they exert their omnipotence and ability to wipe out the human slave-free distinction. But what implications did Senecan philosophy have on the physical institution of slavery? In the very next few sentences of Seneca's *Letters* 47, it becomes apparent that the implications are nowhere near abolitionist:

> I don't want to let myself go on this vast topic, and give you a homily on how to treat slaves: we behave towards them in a proud, cruel and insulting fashion. The sum of what I wish is this: treat those whose status is inferior to you own in the same manner as you would wish your own superior to treat you.[45]

So, Seneca's point, and in all likelihood Gregory's as well, was to treat slaves the way you would want to be treated if you were a slave. This does not imply abolition of the cruel and dehumanizing institution of slavery. It merely states that human

[44] Seneca. *Letters* 47. trans. Wiedemann 1981: 233-36

[45] Seneca. *Letters* 47. trans. Wiedemann 1981: 233-36

masters should keep in mind that they may themselves be at the mercy of the almighty master, God.

Early Christianity was both accepting and reinforcing of the Greco-Roman institution of slavery. It is only from the view in the context of contemporary Greco-Roman non-Christian literature that one may deduce that early Christian literature was abolitionist. The continuation of Roman ideals of slavery for centuries even with the rise of Christianity is an example of how Whig history fails. The mass enslavement and dehumanization of fellow human beings for the benefit of the master class went on for centuries without a sign of improvement or moral questioning. In addition, without studying the Christian and non-Christian Greco-Roman literature together, it becomes easy to drastically misinterpret early Christian literature as is apparent with D. Bentley Hart's interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily IV.* The parallels between Christian and non-Christian Greco-Roman literature display early Christian authors' acceptance and implication in Greco-Roman ("pagan") idealogy, most notably in the "household codes" of Colossians and Ephesians.

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